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Loaded with rare plants such as Canadian buffalo berry and home to endangered songbirds such as the cerulean warbler, 2 1/2 miles of bluffs and ravines on the North Shore are on their way to protection from development at Ft. Sheridan, thanks to a provision tucked into a national defense-spending bill.

Sponsored by U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.), who lives near the bluffs, the proposal outlines their transfer from the Navy, which owns them, to Openlands Project, a non-profit land conservancy based in Chicago.

"It's the first step toward making our dream a reality," said Openlands Associate Director Joyce O'Keefe, who said at a news conference Monday that she envisions a public park on the site. "It is an opportunity to see an ecosystem like they have never seen before."

Recognized by naturalists as one of the state's most unique ecosystems, the stretch of beaches, banks and ravines front dilapidated military housing at Ft. Sheridan, which is scheduled to be torn down and replaced.

Kirk's provision appears in the fiscal 2005 National Defense Authorization Act, which was passed by the House on May 20 and awaits action in the Senate.

"If Congress does not take action, a developer could build high-rises along the bluffs," Kirk said. "We don't want a 'Gold Coast North' of high-rises along the lake."

Conservationists say the area is at least a temporary home to endangered cerulean warblers, Henslow's sparrows and peregrine falcons, and that rare plants such as ground juniper, dog violet and arborvitae can be found among the dense green that spills onto the ravine roads and rock-strewn beach.

"There are true pockets of exceptional quality," said Stephen Bartram, executive director of the Lake Forest Open Lands Association. "There are parts of the ravine and lake bluffs in

surprisingly good condition."

Officials and conservationists say they hope to restore the area to the way it was hundreds of years ago, when Father Jacques Marquette paddled by in the 17th Century.

"If we do it right, you will find it doubly beautiful" than the way it appears today, O'Keefe said of the restoration plans.

The cost of restoration has not been calculated, she said.

Before restoration could begin, Openlands would need to find about \$125,000 for a survey of the land before it could be transferred, Kirk said.

"It is going to be an expensive undertaking," Bartram said. "But the long-term benefits tremendously outweigh the cost."